Metrosexuals: men commercializing themselves

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Last year, metrosexuals finally began to make frequent appearances in the Japanese media. From the outward look of things it might seem that the feminization of men has been realized. Japanese metrosexuals beautify their bodies from head to toe, visiting nail and ‘esthe’ salons for esthetic (or beauty) treatments. On their way to the salon, they might pick up a copy of LEON, a fashion magazine aimed primarily at style-obsessed men in their thirties and forties, then call into Isetan Department Store, which has installed a man’s cosmetic corner, where they can stock up on the latest beauty products. To the casual observer, it might appear that the Japanese man has become completely feminized. Yet when we look at the changes in masculine appearance over the last ten years, and the accompanying lexicon, it is this really the case?

In 1995, boys called femio (feminine men) suddenly appeared on the streets. They adopted women’s popular culture, in lifestyle and fashion, adoring and imitating the actor Ishida Issei. Particularly noteworthy was the way they shaped their eyebrows. Before 2000, words like kakkoi (cool) and hansom (handsome) were typically used to praise men’s appearance. Sometime around that year, however, a new term, ikemen, replaced these words. Ikemen is clearly of a different nature than kakkoi, representing masculinity and hansom, for the male appearance. The affix ike of ikemen is an abbreviation of ikei, a word used by young people that originates from kikei, meaning ‘wonderful’ or ‘cool.’ The stem of ikemen, men, has a double meaning ‘face’ in Japanese and ‘men’ in English. For ikemen, women have the potential to be their accessories — things that are ‘pretty and neat,’ to be paraded around. Ironically, however, it is women who really define which men are lucky enough to be labeled as ikemen.

So are metrosexuals equal to ikemen? They are not. A man may be called ikemen only when he is defined as such by women, whereas metrosexuals are those who try to stick to the dictates of fashion, aiming to become popular with women. A metrosexual can therefore become ikemen if he is lucky enough to be approved by women. Generally, ikemen are in their late teens to early twenties. Being young, with good skin, they have little or no need to pour large sums of money into skin care. When they can no longer look good enough by themselves, usually due to age, they need to buy their good looks. That is when they become metrosexuals.

Metrosexuals often say that one reason why they are particular about their appearance is that they want to be “popular with women.” However, there is a clear tendency in these words to commercialize oneself as an “accessory.” Men used to be the sex with the right to choose women, but there is now a new value added to this, of instead being chosen by women. These days, the men who insist on choosing women are those with the special privilege of being otaku (fanboys or geeks), who are only interested in 2.5 dimensional women. This is neither a two-dimensional animation character nor a three-dimensional real, living woman. In this middle ground named by Honda Toru, author of Moe Otoko (Men Attracted to Animation Characters), one finds women such as the maids in “maid cafés,” whom men can choose as they like.

In Japan, the magazine LEON has become the new metrosexual bible. Using the derogatory term for middle-aged men, oyaji, positively with article titles like “Choikuryou (waru) Oyaji” (A Bit of a Bad Old Boy) and “Mote-oyaji” (Popular Old Man), with a clear generational separation from ikemen, LEON proposes and promotes the image of a new kind of iketarou man who will be popular with women. With this development, even men who despite great efforts have failed to be ikemen are now relieved. And those in the generation which resists being recognized as oyaji may call themselves metrosexual. In addition, it seems that many gay men who have not come out also call themselves metrosexual in any case, we can say that ‘metrosexual’ is more than just a convenient word.

What is a metrosexual?
This word came into popular use around 2000 to describe men who, in a shift from traditional masculinity, are keenly interested in fashion, beauty treatments, and hair and makeup. Metrosexuals — where the shopping, gym and salons are — and “sexual” can be straight, gay or bi-sexual. British soccer star David Beckham is an item in Japan as elsewhere in his considered the archetypical metrosexual.

What is moe?
Moe can also be used for describing stories and situations. While moe was burst into bloom, but it is currently mostly used to define something in Japanese. Literally, moe means to sprout or grow, but it is currently mostly used to describe the feelings (affection, attraction or even fetishism) that fans have for their favorite characters, or the love relationships between these characters. Moe can also be used for describing stories and situations. While moe was once used mainly by men to describe cute girl characters, it is now also used by women.

Early in the new millennium, the term moe entered the language. Moe refers to certain intense feelings. This is a slang word related to otaku culture — the fandom of manga, anime and computer games. There is no English equivalent for men, nor even a unified definition in Japanese. Literally, moe means to sprout or burst into bloom, but it is currently mostly used to describe the feelings (affection, attraction or even fetishism) that fans have for their favorite characters, or the love relationships between the characters. Moe can also be used for describing stories and situations. While moe was once used mainly by men to describe cute girl characters, it is now also used by women.